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WHY CORNWALLIS WAS AT YORKTOWN.

WHEN Lord George Germaine waited upon Lord North with the news of the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, on the 19th of October, 1781, the minister received it, Germaine says, as he would have taken a ball in his breast, and exclaimed : “ O God ! it is all over ! ” It was not merely that a battle, or a town, or an army had been lost ; it was the loss of a cause. The final military movement, which had been devised and depended upon for the subjugation of the American Colonies, had failed, and the British Empire was now hopelessly divided.

No wonder that such intelligence came to Lord North like the blow of a bullet. The misfortunes of his country, even when they were not the result of his own stupidity and obstinacy, he could bear with the most good-natured equanimity ; but this announcement of a disintegration of empire was the announcement also of the defeat of party. Who could stop to think of the welfare of the people when a cabinet was in jeopardy ? Had Lord North ever heard of that habitual prayer, through all those trying years of the Revolution, of a country clergyman in Massachusetts—“ Deliver us, O Lord, from Lord North, the Flesh, and the Devil ! ”—he would have felt almost ready to acknowledge that the most earnest purpose of the petition had been listened to, and that Providence had gone over to the side of the rebels.

Great things had been expected of the operations at the South, which Sir Henry Clinton had left in the hands of Lord Cornwallis at the fall of Charleston the year before. And if the colonies were to be saved, it was obvious enough to almost everybody that a great thing must be done somewhere. Hitherto, exhaustive as the struggle had been, the promise of success was on the rebel side. Except from the Canadian border in northern New York, the war had never been carried inland more than half a day’s march from tide-water. The defeat of Burgoyne was of the last

importance, not merely because it was a campaign won on one side and an army lost on the other, but because the interior was saved from the danger of the proposed junction of the armies under Burgoyne and Clinton. It was plain that the rebels had no cause for despair or despondency if their own spirit and their own resources held out, so long as they could thus keep the enemy at bay. It was equally plain, on the other side, that five years of want of success foreshadowed ultimate defeat.

The one chance left was at the South. There the Tory element was larger and more active. The distance from the North and the difficulty of communication were so great, that the rebellious people could place little reliance upon any efficient aid from that quarter, either in men or the munitions of war. The Southern colonies, therefore, it was hoped, could be saved to the Crown, and then, perhaps, the rest be recovered. For, that they were already as good as lost was a conviction making its way in every intelligent mind in England, except the King's,—if his may be called intelligent,—though as yet it was not much talked about.

Accordingly affairs seemed to put on another aspect, at least to the English mind in England, with the successive reports of the progress of Cornwallis in the Carolinas. That the real character of his campaigns was misunderstood, only made the reverse at Yorktown, the next autumn, the harder to bear. It was believed that from the northern boundary of Georgia to the southern boundary of Virginia, he had not merely overrun but had conquered the whole country; that he had aroused a loyal people zealous enough and strong enough to hold it in firm allegiance to the Crown; that over every rebel stood a guard, and the guard was his neighbor, or even several of his neighbors. Rebellion was dead south of Virginia; from North Carolina to New York it was hemmed in between two fires. So it looked in England; to Sir Henry Clinton it seemed that all this, though not yet quite true, might be made so if there were no abatement of effort in that region of country. Cornwallis knew better.

He had tried the experiment of subduing the southernmost colonies by invasion from the South, and it was a failure. He believed it would continue to be a failure so long as communication between them and the North was left open. True, as he moved northward from Charleston with an army of veteran troops, commanded by some of the best officers who had seen service in America, his progress was irresistible. Rebellion was

trampled down before him. He established and he held such posts as he pleased. He scattered, usually without much difficulty, though sometimes at heavy cost, such armed resistance as the country militia could offer. He could rally about him the loyal Tories wherever he went, and could generally rely upon them for destroying their neighbors' property and cutting their neighbors' throats with an alacrity and zeal worthy of the warmest praise. But he also knew that the rebellion trampled down in the van of his troops was not trampled out, but was as lively as ever the moment he was out of sight; that the posts he garrisoned held the country in subjection precisely within the range of a musket or the swing of a saber; that the militia scattered by a charge of his veteran cavalry would be found, very likely, in ambush at the next turn of the road, or would be heard from, when the troops were half-way across the next ford, from behind the trees and rocks on the opposite bank; that the stealing of cattle and horses and crops, the burning of barns and houses, and the hanging and shooting of their owners, would be continued with unremitting diligence—only that as soon as his back was turned actors and sufferers would change places.

Warfare of this character was fruitless and discouraging to the invader. It was even the more discouraging that it was varied occasionally by real battles, which taught the English commanders that these rough partisans of the woods and swamps could be turned into formidable soldiery when they thought it worth while to submit to military discipline. Ferguson, if he aspired to a soldier's death on a well-fought field, could not have found a more honorable one than when he fell at King's Mountain. The campaign may have seemed to Tarleton as exciting as a fox-chase till he met Morgan at Cowpens. When he heard the cry of "Tarleton's quarter!" in reply to the prayers of his men for mercy,—prayers which, it should be said, were nevertheless not unheeded,—he may have reflected that his contempt and his cruelty had been equally unwise. When the news of the battle at Guilford Court-house was received in England, Fox said, in the House of Commons, "Another such victory would ruin the British army." What Cornwallis thought of it he showed by leaving Greene behind him unmolested, on Troublesome Creek, and by marching, within two days, straight for Wilmington. Publicly, he said: "I thought it was time to look for some place for rest and refitment." Privately, he wrote to his friend General

Phillips that he was "tired of marching about in search of adventures."

Such partisan and desultory warfare did not in the least commend itself to his military judgment. The aim of war is not adventures. The subjugation of the Carolinas was no nearer in the spring of 1781, when he arrived at Wilmington, than in the spring of 1780, when he left Charleston. What end could be gained by marching and countermarching for another year through the country in search of Sumter and Marion and Davie, and the other partisan chiefs? He could never find them if they did not choose to be found; but they were never at a loss to know where they could find him. They might disperse or be dispersed, but they could never be disorganized. They might lie hidden, unknown to him, in the depths of swamps, within sound of the neighing of his own horses; yet their communication with each other, wherever they might be, was certain and rapid. The men who to-day were holding the plow or wield-ing the sickle, would be ready to-morrow to shoulder their rifles at the call of their leaders, ready to hang on his flanks or his rear, to cut off his detachments, or run off his supply-trains into the woods. It was like fighting shadows, the substance of which, however, was felt, though not seen.

From a purely military point of view, this state of things was altogether irregular, and to the purely military man exceedingly exasperating. There were no rules laid down in the books for its management, and it was absolutely subversive of all military discipline. Some captains were hopelessly incapable at the head of companies where every trigger had a brain behind it as well as a forefinger in front. But there were also trained soldiers who were too wise to undervalue this kind of fighting material. Cornwallis spoke of this irregular soldiery as the "warlike militia," and with quiet sarcasm he wrote to Clinton: "The list of British officers and soldiers killed and wounded by them since last June proves but too fatally that they are not wholly contemptible." Morgan understood them perfectly. He wrote to General Greene, not long before the battle of Guilford: "I expect Lord Cornwallis will push you until you are obliged to fight him. . . . You'll have, from what I see, a great number of militia. If they fight, you'll beat Cornwallis; if not, he'll beat you." What Morgan himself could do with them he had shown at Cowpens.

The problem of a Southern campaign was, how to conduct it to a successful issue under such conditions. It was obvious that not much more than the skeleton of a regular army could be sent from the North. So long, however, as even this could be done, and the South be assured of some support from the Congress, and that the good cause was not hopeless, just so long would the fighting men of the Carolinas hold together and rally around such an army, if it were only a general and his staff. But they would hold together after their own methods, and would clothe, also in their own way, the regulation frame-work with the blood and sinew and muscle that would fit it for effective work.

Washington knew that he could do little to help the South, except to help the South to help herself. The policy of her fighting men was to avoid as long as possible any general battle, which, from the circumstances of the case, they could rarely hope to win. What they aimed to do, and what they did, was to harass the enemy at every point; to cut him off and cut him up in detachments; to make the country everywhere too hot to hold him; to render the contest, as Cornwallis afterward declared it had proved to be, "impracticable against the rebellious inhabitants, supported by a continental army."

It was Gates's mistake that he failed to recognize the fact that the defense of the country depended upon the people, and that their aid must be accepted in the way they chose to give it. A late historian of "The Battles of the Revolution" says of that general, that "there is not a redeeming fact during his connection with the Southern army to show his fitness to command troops." The truth seems to be rather that he did not understand there was any Southern army to command outside of his few regular troops. At the battle of Camden he did not know, and, apparently, did not care, what force of militia was present. From his disposition of them, he seemed to think they might be of some use in being killed; it clearly did not occur to him that on this point they might have definite opinions of their own, and would pay small regard to his wishes.

"I think I am giving you a general," Washington said, when Greene was appointed to supersede Gates; "but what can a general do without men, without arms, without clothing, without stores, without provisions?" What could be done it was for the military genius of this Quaker general to show. Neither men

nor means were wanting if they were looked for in the right place and used in the right way. They would have hardly understood him if he had talked about a Fabian policy, for "Plutarch's Lives" had not yet become the *vade mecum* of Southern culture. But they understood his method, and saw how carefully it was adapted to that of Marion and Sumter, and the other leaders of the irregulars of that country. Their confidence in him was unbounded, because they knew he understood what they could and what they could not do, and acted accordingly. His reliance upon them was unswerving, because he knew that performance would keep step with promise where nothing beyond was asked or expected. After the battle of Guilford he retreated in good order from a well-fought field, considering that only about a third of his small army were regulars, and were outnumbered by the veterans on the other side. He lost a battle, but he gained a campaign. His communications were unbroken; his little army on Troublesome Creek, though ragged, and barefoot, and hungry, had lost nothing of its courage and will; his larger army of partisans and militia, hidden away in forests and swamps, or scattered among the plantations, from the Dan to the Santee, was as indomitable as ever.

Cornwallis knew what a contest was with these people when without a general; it was easy to see what it probably would be with such a general as Greene. Had Cornwallis remained in the Carolinas he would not have saved those provinces; but then he would not have lost Yorktown. A similar result would have come, perhaps, in some other way. But that particular result would not have happened had he not relinquished the attempt to subdue the Carolinas as hopeless so long as Virginia was in possession of the rebels, and undertaken, without orders and without consultation with his chief, to carry on the war in another way. When he turned his back upon Guilford Court-house, and his face to the sea, he took the first step on the high-road that led straight to an inevitable catastrophe.

The move to Wilmington alarmed Clinton lest disaster should follow in the Southern provinces. He chose to assume, however, that Cornwallis was ready to march southward again should such disaster seem imminent. But when he learned positively that Cornwallis was about to push forward into Virginia, he avows his disapprobation in a remarkable protest. "Had it been possible," he wrote, in May, "for your Lordship, in your letter to me

of the 10th ult., to have intimated the probability of your intention to form a junction with General Phillips [in Virginia], I should certainly have endeavored to have stopped you, as I did then, as well as now, consider such a move as likely to be dangerous to our interests in the Southern colonies."

Perhaps it was the strain of official courtesy that led to this discomfiture of logic and of grammar. How was it possible that Cornwallis should, on the 10th of April, "intimate the probability of an intention" to join Phillips in Virginia, when he did not know till the 22d of April that Phillips had been ordered to that province? And how, if no such intimation was given because it was impossible, did it happen that Clinton "did then . . . consider such a move as dangerous"? But the truth is, Cornwallis had given a very positive intimation of his inclination in his letter of April 10th, and Clinton is anxious to cover up his own stupidity in not understanding it, by complaining that an intention subsequently formed in accordance with that inclination was not conveyed to him. Cornwallis said in that letter: "I cannot help expressing my wishes that the Chesapeake may become the seat of war, even (if necessary) at the expense of abandoning New York. Until Virginia is in a manner subdued, our hold of the Carolinas must be difficult, if not precarious." Fortunately, this hint seems to have fallen upon dull ears, and was only made to do service as an after-thought, when intention had become an accomplished fact.

Whatever may have been Cornwallis's intention before the 22d of April, he decided what to do the moment he heard that Phillips was in Virginia. He knew that the object of that expedition was to aid his own campaign in North Carolina; he seized upon it as the pretext for abandoning that campaign altogether. He wrote the next day to Lord George Germaine that he apprehended he could not join Lord Rawdon in South Carolina without great hazard, as, should he attempt it, General Greene might hem him in, cut off his subsistence, and render his arms useless; he resolved, therefore, to march immediately and attempt a junction with General Phillips. Four days before, he had discussed the condition of affairs more at length in a letter to the minister. The Tories of the Southern colonies, whose aid had been so largely counted on, were not, he said, nearly so numerous as was supposed, and their loyalty was of no practical value; the character of the Southern country made it impossible for a hostile

army to hold it, and very difficult to reduce it to obedience by a direct attack. "If, therefore," he concluded, "it should appear to be the interest of Great Britain to maintain what she already possesses and to push the war in the Southern provinces, I take the liberty of giving it as my opinion that a serious attempt upon Virginia would be the most solid plan, because successful operations might not only be attended with important consequences there, but would tend to the security of South Carolina, and ultimately to the submission of North Carolina."

In announcing to General Phillips, the next day, his intention to march immediately to Virginia, he says: "My situation here is very distressing. Greene took the advantage of my being obliged to come to this place, and has marched to South Carolina." It is remarkable that it had not occurred to him earlier that Greene was that kind of a man who "takes advantage" of the blunders of an enemy. Colonel Tarleton, in his history of these campaigns, says that "the move toward the shipping in Cape Fear River," after the battle of Guilford, "had prompted General Greene to point his course toward South Carolina." He adds that "the wisdom and vigour" of these movements "deranged all the designs of Earl Cornwallis at Wilmington." If Cornwallis had really had any intention of taking the field again in the Carolinas, he may have now become convinced that he had lost the chance of doing so with any hope of success by his blunder in leaving Greene behind him at Troublesome Creek; that the only way to atone for that blunder and extricate himself from the situation which was so "distressing," was to make the presence of Phillips in Virginia an excuse for joining him, to change the seat of war to that province, and strike there a telling blow.

As it was fortunate that Clinton did not accept the dispatch of April 10th as "an intimation of the probability of an intention," so now, fortunately, when the intention was positively announced in dispatches of the 23d, it was too late for either expostulation or counter orders. Before the letters reached New York, Cornwallis was in Virginia. He relied upon favor at court to sustain him, and referred Clinton, for his determination and the reasons by which he justified it, to copies of his letters to Germaine. No wonder the commander-in-chief was indignant. "As your lordship is now so near," he soon wrote to Cornwallis in Virginia, "it will be unnecessary for you to send your dispatches immediately to the minister; you will, therefore, be so good as to send

them to me in future." The studied courtesy of official correspondence between the two generals was henceforth tempered by an acrimony bitter enough to show that each was quite willing to see the other come to grief. "They were so ill together," says Horace Walpole, "that Sir Henry had owned to Conway that he was determined to challenge Lord Cornwallis after the campaign." When the end came, however, the consequences of their differences had proved too momentous to admit of their consideration as a mere personal quarrel.

Cornwallis arrived at Petersburg on the 20th of May. Almost from that moment, the want of harmony between the two generals led to the confusion which ended in disaster in the movements in Virginia. "Lord Cornwallis," says Clinton, "had forced himself upon me in that province": "Lord Cornwallis thought proper to decline engaging in the plan of operations which I had proposed to him in case he had none of his own." Of course Cornwallis was not without a plan; else why was he in Virginia at all? He had, on his sole responsibility, abandoned North Carolina to Greene; he had left Rawdon in peril in South Carolina, and jeopardized the loss of the whole of that province, as he acknowledged, except the district immediately around Charleston; and this complete change in the conduct of the war he had taken upon himself to make because he believed that those provinces could only be subdued by first reducing Virginia. He would make the war aggressive there, because it had necessarily ceased to be so farther south, and had become defensive merely. And he said: "If our plan is defensive, let us quit the Carolinas (which cannot be held defensively while Virginia can be so easily armed against us), and stick to our salt pork at New York, sending now and then a detachment to steal tobacco, etc." What else could Clinton expect but that Cornwallis should reject all plans except those of his own devising, which he came to Virginia for the sole purpose of carrying out? He had appealed to Germaine for support. To falter now would be a tacit acknowledgment that his case was a proper one for the consideration of a court-martial.

Clinton, on the other hand, believed in the old plan—the conquest of the Southern provinces by direct attack, and as preparatory to the reduction of the more northern colonies, Virginia, and the rest. He had sent Phillips and Arnold to Virginia first to intercept all aid to Greene; and when all should be done that

could be done in this way on behalf of Cornwallis in North Carolina, then Phillips and Arnold were to make a diversion in favor of New York, so perpetually menaced by Washington, by a move to the Upper Chesapeake, which should threaten both Baltimore and Philadelphia. But when Cornwallis came into possession of Phillips's papers,—that general having died of fever a few days before Cornwallis reached Petersburg,—he assumed, because Phillips's opinion had been asked, that it was proper to give his own. He disapproved, he said, of the plan of the commander-in-chief. As a mere preliminary to his own larger plan of dividing the colonies by driving in a wedge of separation in Virginia, he proposed to brush Lafayette out of the way,—“the boy,” he said, “cannot escape me,”—and then he would return to Williamsburg to await further communication from the commander-in-chief. No doubt he expected Clinton would submit as before, and that he would have his own way.

Here was the crucial point in the relations of the two generals. Clinton was not disposed to give up his own plan for the conduct of the war, that another, which he did not in the least approve of, might be carried out by Cornwallis. He therefore directed Cornwallis, as he declined to move toward the Upper Chesapeake, to take a defensive and healthful position where a harbor could be secured for line-of-battle ships, and return so much of his force as was not needed for defense of the post, to New York. The positive orders of a military superior must be obeyed; but they can be so obeyed as to hinder, and not to help.

Before this point in the controversy was reached,—when Cornwallis was expecting to have his own way in a campaign for the reduction of Virginia, even, if necessary, “at the expense of abandoning New York,”—he had written to Clinton that he was “inclined to think well of York as a proper harbour and place of arms”—that is, as a base for his own operations; that Portsmouth was objectionable because it could not “be made strong without an army to protect it”; that it was “remarkably unhealthy,” and that it could “give no protection to a ship of the line.” York, in other words, was the best place for his own purposes, and Portsmouth was the worst on Chesapeake Bay. But when his plan was rejected, and the commander-in-chief ordered him to take such a position as Cornwallis himself had suggested York was and Portsmouth was not, he immediately put his army in motion and marched, not to York, but to Portsmouth.

As in the case of the advance into Virginia from Wilmington, Clinton was not advised of this move to Portsmouth till it was too late to countermand it. "I flattered myself," he wrote to Cornwallis, "that you would at least have waited for a line from me before you finally determined upon so serious and mortifying a move"; and he reminded him that he would find in those instructions to Phillips—by which Cornwallis professed to be guided when seeking to justify himself for rejecting the proposition to move against Baltimore and Philadelphia—that he, the commander-in-chief, had there said, "God forbid I should think of burying the *élite* of my army in Nansemond and Princess Anne!" Perhaps both he and Cornwallis wished, three months later, that it had been buried there.

The repeated orders for the return of troops to New York were baffled by this movement to Portsmouth, and, before the position at Yorktown was taken, the season was so advanced they could not be spared from the work of intrenchment. It was near the end of July before it was decided that Old Point Comfort was not a tenable position; it was nearly the middle of August before all the troops were landed at York and Gloucester. The watchful eyes of Washington—"Mr." Washington, as Clinton was always careful to call him—were on all these delays and blunders of the summer. The intrenching tools of Cornwallis's men had hardly broken ground at Yorktown before the American and French armies had crossed the Hudson, though Clinton did not discover for a week that they had marched southward. Before the end of September, Cornwallis was surrounded in the trap of his own contriving. Before the end of October, the stillness of midnight in the streets of Philadelphia was broken by the cry of a Scotch watchman,—"Past twal o'clock, a cloudy mornin', an' Cornwallis be tak'n!"

SYDNEY HOWARD GAY.